

Marshall University

Marshall Digital Scholar

0064: Marshall University Oral History
Collection

Digitized Manuscript Collections

1999

Oral History Interview: Jeff E. Thomas

Jeff E. Thomas

Follow this and additional works at: https://mds.marshall.edu/oral_history

Recommended Citation

Marshall University Special Collections, OH64-625, Huntington, WV.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Digitized Manuscript Collections at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in 0064: Marshall University Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu.

RELEASE FORM

Deed of Gift to the Public Domain

I, Jeff E. Thomas, do hereby give to the Oral History of Appalachia Program of Marshall University the tape recordings and transcripts of my interview(s) on June 4, 1999.

I authorize the Oral History of Appalachia Program of Marshall University to use the tapes and transcripts in such a manner as may best serve the educational and historical objectives of their Oral History Program.

In making this gift, I voluntarily convey ownership of the tapes and transcripts to the public domain.

Barbara Steinke
(Agent of the Oral History of Appalachia Program)

Jeff E. Thomas
(Donor)

June 4, 1999
(Date)

16

**An oral interview with: Jeff E. Thomas
by: Barbara Steinke**

Mr. Thomas was born in 1958, grew up in a coal camp in Wyco, WV, Wyoming County. Jeff's ancestry includes Irish, Dutch and Italian. Jeff briefly describes what he believes to be Appalachian stereotypes. He also discusses his father's employment with Amigo Smokeless Coal. Other topics discussed are unions and his and siblings early and college educations.

Interview of JEFF E. THOMAS

June 4, 1999

by Barbara Steinke

1 BARBARA: My name is Barbara Steinke, and today is
2 June 4, 1999. I am interviewing Jeff E. Thomas at his home in
3 Charleston, West Virginia, for the oral history project at
4 Marshall University.

5 Jeff, do you understand that this tape and transcript will
6 be archived in the Marshall University library and available to
7 anyone who would like to use it?

8 JEFF: I do understand.

9 BARBARA: And you agree to that?

10 JEFF: I agree to that.

11 BARBARA: Okay. I'm going to check the tape.

12 Well, why don't we start out with your background, where
13 you were born and how long you've lived in -- your family has
14 lived in West Virginia.

15 JEFF: Okay. Born on July 22nd, 1958, in what was the
16 Miners -- called the Miners Hospital in Beckley, West
17 Virginia. It's now part of Appalachian Regional Hospital
18 Systems. And born at 7:20 in the evening.

19 BARBARA: Okay. Where was your house located?

20 JEFF: My parents lived -- at that time when I was
21 born, they lived with my father's parents in a town called
22 Lillybrook, West Virginia, a coal mining community in Raleigh
23 County, on the border of Raleigh County and Wyoming County.

24 BARBARA: So your parents were living with --

25 JEFF: My dad's parents, correct.

1 BARBARA: And were you the first child born or where
2 were you in terms of --

3 JEFF: I was the first child born to that marriage,
4 yes.

5 BARBARA: Okay.

6 JEFF: I think the reason they were living there was
7 because they were young and he had just started working in the
8 coal mines and my mother just -- she was still young, sixteen,
9 and hadn't completed high school yet. And so when they got
10 married, they didn't have anyplace to live so my grandparents
11 took them in.

12 BARBARA: Is that uncommon in small towns for parents
13 to live with their --

14 JEFF: Not uncommon.

15 BARBARA: Right. I thought that it was --

16 JEFF: Pretty typical for this area and, you know,
17 they always try to help their kids and try to get them on their
18 foot. And even if a house opened up in the coal camp down
19 below them, they would try to get their name on the list and
20 say, well, we have a young family here and is trying to get
21 started and just had a baby, they need a place to live, you
22 know.

23 BARBARA: So your grandfather, was he a coal miner?

24 JEFF: He was a coal miner.

25 BARBARA: And were his parents from West Virginia

1 also?

2 JEFF: No. His parents were from Concord, Virginia,
3 and that was his background. He came in the early years, in
4 his early years to work in the coal mines to West Virginia.

5 BARBARA: And what about your grandmother?

6 JEFF: And my grandmother came -- I think her history
7 is from Richmond, that area. And so they kind of immigrated to
8 West Virginia back in the early 1900s.

9 BARBARA: They came together then. They met and --

10 JEFF: Right.

11 BARBARA: And he moved into a coal camp, coal company
12 housing I guess --

13 JEFF: Right.

14 BARBARA: -- that they provided. Which coal company
15 was this?

16 JEFF: It was called Lillybrook Coal Company.

17 BARBARA: Okay. So how long did you live with your
18 grandparents?

19 JEFF: Of course, I was an infant and I really can't
20 remember anything other than I remember the day that we moved
21 and I was -- I tell people this, but I do have a good memory
22 about age two or two and a half. And around 1960 or in the
23 Spring of 1960, my parents did find a place to live in Mullens,
24 West Virginia. And I remember then I was sitting on the swing
25 at the coal camp house in Lillybrook, and my parents picked me

1 up and just put me in the car and we drove this -- it seemed
2 like a god awful long trip to Mullens, West Virginia, which in
3 reality it's only like a fifteen minute drive down the holler
4 and down the road, you know, but it seemed long then.

5 And they moved into the basement apartment of a house, and
6 it was three rooms: a kitchen, living room, one bedroom and a
7 bath. And I remember my mother not liking it because there
8 were water bugs and everything because it was damp all the time
9 and had no windows except one on the front of the apartment.
10 It kind of set on the hillside on a street. And I remember her
11 not liking that at all.

12 BARBARA: Did you stay there very long?

13 JEFF: We stayed there -- well, my sister was born
14 when I was there the next year and then we moved. She was born
15 in March and I think we moved in the Summer of '62 or '60, I'm
16 sorry. We didn't stay very long.

17 And by that time my dad had transferred to another coal
18 company, gotten a better job with some, I guess what they call
19 benefits, not really benefits, but he was able to get -- they
20 had a company store and he was able to buy supplies and food
21 and clothing and stuff like that, and them just take it out of
22 his check when he was working in the mines.

23 BARBARA: Did you move to a company house?

24 JEFF: We did move to a company house in a community
25 named Wyco, W-y-c-o. Back then that was one of the --

1 supposedly the nicest coal mining communities that a coal
2 company -- it was responsible for its upkeep, so it had all of
3 its employees maintain their houses, whitewash their wooden
4 fences, whitewash their houses. They were all wood paneled
5 houses. They were all -- every one of them was white, all the
6 same color. There were always flowers planted in the yards,
7 very nice and neat, you know.

8 And I remember us moving into this house, and the outside
9 looked pretty good but the inside was just in shambles. You
10 know, it was all torn up. It had an old linoleum floor. My
11 first impression was an old ringer washing machine in the
12 middle of the kitchen floor and the light bulb was hanging down
13 from a string, and I thought, oh, boy, you know, we're back in
14 the bad place again.

15 BARBARA: So you were thinking coal camp was a bad
16 place or just --

17 JEFF: Well, I kept thinking, you know, my parents
18 always talked about doing better, and every time I seen them do
19 something, it always seemed like we were going downhill, you
20 know. But in reality it wasn't. I guess that was a child's
21 perspective. They always look for the best things and want for
22 the best or they see other things around them, but they really
23 don't realize what they have.

24 BARBARA: So it sounds like the appearance of this
25 mining town --

1 JEFF: It was attractive.

2 BARBARA: -- was very attractive, but actually inside
3 was not any different from what you had experienced before at
4 your grandparents or --

5 JEFF: Well, my grandmother was a good housekeeper.
6 There was no problem from what I remember. I don't remember
7 much about living there, you know.

8 BARBARA: Right.

9 JEFF: I remember that the move was traumatic enough
10 for it to set a memory pattern for me.

11 BARBARA: But did you go back and visit?

12 JEFF: I don't ever remember going back to that
13 house --

14 BARBARA: Oh, okay.

15 JEFF: -- my grandparents' house, you know. And they
16 moved elsewhere after that, and so then that family
17 relationship started all over again in a different location.

18 BARBARA: Oh, okay.

19 JEFF: They moved a lot. My grandfather really moved
20 a lot.

21 BARBARA: Why did he do that?

22 JEFF: Looking back on it now, retrospective, he was
23 an alcoholic and he had trouble holding a job down. You know,
24 he drank a lot and he would get into fights and gamble all the
25 money away and run up a debt at the company store or something

1 at the mines he was working at, and so he would up and leave
2 and take his family with him.

3 BARBARA: And then find another job in a coal mine and
4 start over again.

5 JEFF: Yeah, and my dad often talked about that. You
6 know, one year he would spend school in one school, and the
7 next year it would be something different, and the next year it
8 would be something different. He moved around a lot. Almost
9 like being an army brat, but we were Appalachian brats.

10 BARBARA: So did you stay in Wyco for a while?

11 JEFF: Stayed in Wyco for -- until I got ready to go
12 to college.

13 BARBARA: Okay.

14 JEFF: So that was my home and I grew up there.

15 BARBARA: And what was that like? What did you -- did
16 you -- what was your school like when you went to elementary
17 school?

18 JEFF: Okay. Back when I started elementary school,
19 we were still segregated and the coal camp community was
20 divided between white and black, and the lower community was
21 all black. They were all employees of the coal company. They
22 had their own church, their own bathhouse. And the upper camp,
23 most of it was Irish, Italian American immigrants. And we were
24 part Italian so we moved up in the community where there were
25 some Italian families.

1 And the school was four rooms. It was a brick building
2 called the Wyco Grade School. And on the first floor was
3 grades first and second, and on the second floor was grades
4 fourth and fifth -- or third and fourth, I'm sorry. We didn't
5 have a fifth or sixth grade. We had to go elsewhere if you got
6 up that far. And it was over across the railroad tracks.
7 There were always railroad trains running and everything like
8 that, but it was within walking distance. We were never
9 bussed. All the kids walked from their houses in the community
10 to that school.

11 BARBARA: All the white kids?

12 JEFF: All the white kids. But in -- this was in 1963
13 when all of the segregation problems started resolving
14 themselves and in '63, '64, '65, if I recall correctly, then I
15 was like in the third grade and then we were integrated. So
16 all the black children came from the lower end of the camp and
17 started coming to school with us, which was fine. We got along
18 just fine. My dad worked with the kids' dads in the mines and
19 we didn't -- you know, we were immigrants, too, so we were just
20 kind of -- we often wondered why they kept us separate anyway.

21 BARBARA: Did you play together as kids?

22 JEFF: We did play together.

23 BARBARA: So the segregation was in the housing and
24 the schools --

25 JEFF: Correct.

1 BARBARA: -- but everyone got together.

2 JEFF: Right, and there were community-wide picnics,
3 you know.

4 BARBARA: Sponsored by the company?

5 JEFF: Sponsored by the company, and it was
6 integrated.

7 BARBARA: The picnics were integrated?

8 JEFF: Yeah.

9 BARBARA: Did some of the white children then go to
10 the school that the black children used to go to --

11 JEFF: No, they closed the black school.

12 BARBARA: They closed the black school, okay.

13 JEFF: And then later years turned it into a community
14 resource center or something like that. The community still
15 exists and there are still families that live there. It's
16 still somewhat segregated oddly enough. There are still black
17 people who live on one end and white people, immigrant families
18 who live on the other end, and it's never changed.

19 BARBARA: And you said you were Italian, part Italian?

20 JEFF: Yeah, my mother.

21 BARBARA: Your mother is Italian. And your father is?

22 JEFF: My father was Dutch and Irish.

23 BARBARA: Dutch and Irish. You had mentioned that the
24 fifth and sixth grade you went somewhere else if you got that
25 far?

1 JEFF: Yeah.

2 BARBARA: What did you mean by that?

3 JEFF: Well, there were a lot of dropouts.

4 BARBARA: In the fourth grade?

5 JEFF: Right, you know, and even the fifth grade, a
6 lot of it was people didn't want to be bussed. They had a
7 problem with that because they had so many local community
8 schools and you just wanted to stick in your community. You
9 didn't want to go off to the big city.

10 But there was another coal camp of community called
11 Stevenson, West Virginia, which was up the river or up the
12 creek, I guess, from Wyco about three miles. So when they
13 started doing all the integration of schools, they converted
14 their school into a grade school for fifth and sixth graders,
15 okay, and they had enough room for expansion whereas the Wyco
16 school didn't. So they added a couple of rooms on that school,
17 the school board did. So when we got up to fifth and sixth
18 grade, we went to that school.

19 BARBARA: Was school mandatory then? I mean, you said
20 a lot of kids --

21 JEFF: No.

22 BARBARA: So they didn't have to go to school if they
23 didn't want to or that was your perception?

24 JEFF: Right, but I think most parents even now, even
25 in comparison to nowadays, they generally want their kids to go

1 to school and they try every effort to get them to school and
2 everything like that. But there was no cafeteria at that grade
3 school where we went. We always had to pack our lunch if we
4 wanted to eat or we had to walk home. Walking home was
5 dangerous because we had to walk the railroad tracks to get to
6 our community and there were coal trains running every day all
7 day long. That was a constant fear for parents, you know.

8 BARBARA: I'm going to just check this.

9 Okay. You said that your sister was born. Were any other
10 siblings -- do you have any other brothers or sisters?

11 JEFF: I have a younger brother that was born when
12 we -- the year after 1963 when we moved to Wyco.

13 BARBARA: Okay. Were you encouraged to go to school?

14 JEFF: I was, only I think looking back on it now, my
15 parents had very good plans and very good intentions only
16 because I think they felt that they were lacking in certain
17 things. My dad did complete high school, and I'll talk about
18 that a little bit later, but my mom did not complete high
19 school because she married my dad and became pregnant, so she
20 was a junior in Montgomery High School.

21 BARBARA: When they met.

22 JEFF: When they met, and that is where she is
23 originally from, from Smithers, West Virginia. She was born in
24 Smithers in Fayette County. And that was a whole group of
25 Italian families and everything. That's where all that came

1 from. She was so young that she failed to complete high
2 school. So I think in the back of her mind she was determined
3 that her children were going to at least do that.

4 BARBARA: Finish high school.

5 JEFF: Right. So she always pushed that. She was
6 very meticulous in her care of us. We were always clean. You
7 know, even though coal camps are dirty and we like to get out
8 and play, you know, the big thing in the community was that
9 Delores or Sissy, they called my mom Sissy, that she would
10 always keep her kids clean even if she had to bathe them two or
11 three times a day.

12 BARBARA: Was it a close-knit community that way in
13 terms --

14 JEFF: It was. A lot of kids I remember and a lot of
15 young families, you know, starting out, having the same
16 troubles, you know.

17 BARBARA: Most go to the same kind of church? Did you
18 go to church together?

19 JEFF: Yeah, but we were a little different, you know,
20 because immigrant and background, my dad was not Catholic, my
21 mom was, you know --

22 BARBARA: Okay.

23 JEFF: -- and there was a kind of a split in that
24 relationship and back then, that was strictly a no-no, you
25 know, and my dad never converted. So, and at that time in the

1 church, it was converting from Latin to English. It was a big
2 changeover in the church itself and a lot of --

3 BARBARA: And there was a Catholic church in Mullens?

4 JEFF: There was a Catholic church in Mullens, yes.

5 BARBARA: Or Wyco, was there?

6 JEFF: No, there was not in Wyco. It was all
7 Protestant, Baptist Church, Southern Baptist, Pentecostal
8 Holiness, Church of God, and all of the other people. We were
9 in a minority, you know, as to religion wise and we really -- I
10 don't really remember much about the childhood. I just know
11 that we would get up and go or someone would come and take us
12 when the parents couldn't go or something.

13 BARBARA: To a Catholic church?

14 JEFF: Right. And they never really forced the
15 issue. They always allowed us to make the choice, you know,
16 and we would sometimes go with the other kids to the other
17 churches and do school plays with the other churches and
18 everything like that.

19 BARBARA: So being in a minority as a Catholic, did
20 you sense that from the other kids or was that an issue?

21 JEFF: Oh, there were some questions, you know, like
22 why don't you eat meat on Friday or little things like that,
23 you know, back when that was a big thing or whatever. You have
24 a picture of the Virgin Mary hanging on the wall or, you know,
25 they kind of questioned stuff like that. But all in all, it

1 was pretty, you know -- I mean, they didn't throw rocks at the
2 windows. We weren't persecuted.

3 BARBARA: You weren't persecuted, made too much fun
4 of, just questioned.

5 JEFF: Right, right, because most of them were
6 immigrants anyway, you know, Irish and Italian and some Polish.
7 And so you got a little bit of everything. It was an
8 integrated religious community, I'll say.

9 BARBARA: Integrated religious community.

10 JEFF: Yeah.

11 BARBARA: I get the sense that, you know, you refer to
12 people as being immigrants rather than as West Virginians.

13 JEFF: Yeah.

14 BARBARA: Is it because --

15 JEFF: Well, even though if you're born in West
16 Virginia, there's some part of you if you look back, I feel
17 like that most of it would be because of immigration.

18 BARBARA: Well, sure, most --

19 JEFF: We were settled later part of Virginia and
20 there was a lot of coal mining work that came about in the
21 early part of the 1900s and 1910s, and the coal companies
22 needed people to work. So they went to the big cities and got
23 packages of immigrants and brought them in.

24 BARBARA: And that was how your grandfather had come.

25 JEFF: The enticement of work, you know.

1 BARBARA: Your dad -- was your dad union?

2 JEFF: Dad was union, yes.

3 BARBARA: Did they have a lot of union meetings and --

4 JEFF: Yeah.

5 BARBARA: Do you remember any controversies, strikes?

6 JEFF: Oh, yes, yes, there were strikes and there were
7 lean times. You know, when the company store would give you a
8 line of credit and, you know, if you would run out of food or
9 something like that, then they would advance you some food.
10 Then it would just come out of your check when you went back to
11 work, you know, after they settled the union contract if it was
12 going to be settled. And I remember a lot of mothers worrying
13 and, you know, but somehow they made it through, you know. I
14 think that was when my dad started raising a garden for some
15 reason. He found him --

16 BARBARA: Assurance.

17 JEFF: -- a plot of dirt up on the side of the road up
18 the holler somewhere and he kind of staked it off himself and
19 he said this is going to be my garden. And my mom learned how
20 to can. You know, my grandmother taught her that and her
21 mother taught her and so she put away vegetables and stuff in
22 the summertime and we had stuff in the wintertime to eat.

23 BARBARA: Were there anticompany sentiments being
24 expressed --

25 JEFF: No.

1 BARBARA: -- in your family or was it --

2 JEFF: Not back then because that's all they knew, you
3 know, and it was a company-sponsored community.

4 BARBARA: Right

5 JEFF: You know, you were living there in a company
6 house for 2 dollars a month or whatever and they provided you
7 clean sidewalks and the whitewash to paint your fences and your
8 house and would help repair your roof if it needed it and
9 free --

10 BARBARA: So the company took care of you.

11 JEFF: -- free coal for your stoves and fireplaces in
12 the wintertime or at a discount. So I mean, who would question
13 something like that?

14 BARBARA: I don't know, I'm asking. I'm not familiar
15 with what it would be like, if you felt always indebted to the
16 company, if there was that kind of a feeling, or if it felt
17 mutually like a good arrangement.

18 JEFF: Right. Right.

19 BARBARA: Listening, it sounded like it was a good
20 arrangement for your family.

21 JEFF: It was a good arrangement. I think as people
22 grew up and started seeing more of what was going on and the
23 control factor and how much money in relation that the company
24 was making versus how much benefits they were providing for
25 their workers and it started trickling in a little bit, you

1 know. And you started getting people fighting for really high
2 wages in coal mining, you know. Instead of 12 dollars a day,
3 it jumped to 100 dollars a day, and you get 30 days paid time
4 off and enormous benefits, and really trying to pull something
5 back out of the companies that had taken a lot from the people
6 and the land.

7 BARBARA: Right.

8 JEFF: You know, they took a lot of land and they took
9 a lot of coal and minerals, and they ruined our hillsides and,
10 you know, we would have to run for cover when they would blast
11 and do strip mining and everything in the holler across from
12 our house.

13 BARBARA: Was that a frequent occurrence? Was there a
14 lot of strip mining?

15 JEFF: Strip mining was big back then in the '60s.

16 BARBARA: Did your dad do strip mining or underground?

17 JEFF: Underground.

18 BARBARA: Did he stay with the same company the whole
19 time?

20 JEFF: He worked for -- the company at Wyco was called
21 Amigo Smokeless. And I think their -- they got their name
22 because there was a seam of coal somewhere in there that they
23 were mining that was very low sulfur content and it was premium
24 coal because power companies didn't like the pollution and had
25 very little ash left over after it burned. So the power

1 companies were wanting it and they were paying premium price.
2 And that's why they called it smokeless coal, you know. It had
3 very little sulfur. So they were mining it as fast as they
4 could get it out of the ground.

5 BARBARA: And your dad stayed there until he retired?

6 JEFF: No, no. My dad stayed until -- he worked
7 eighteen years, I think, for Amigo Smokeless, all through up
8 until when I was a junior in high school, and then he went in
9 the mining business, he and two partners went into the coal
10 mining business.

11 BARBARA: In the same area?

12 JEFF: In the same area. He was a nonunion -- his
13 company was nonunion, but he sold to a union mine, a union
14 company to process his coal.

15 BARBARA: And did that alleviate some of the problems
16 that I can just imagine happening?

17 JEFF: Well, he was one of the first.

18 BARBARA: Okay.

19 JEFF: He was one of the first, but what he offered
20 was he could offer them higher wages and in return an honest
21 day's work, you know, from his employees, and he expected that.

22 BARBARA: Did you have to move out of the coal camp?

23 JEFF: No.

24 BARBARA: You could stay --

25 JEFF: At that time the coal company had offered the

1 houses for sale.

2 BARBARA: Oh, okay.

3 JEFF: So my parents had bought their home, bought the
4 coal camp house that I grew up in for 1200 dollars, paid 12
5 dollars a month for ten years.

6 BARBARA: Do they still live there now?

7 JEFF: No.

8 BARBARA: They have moved since.

9 JEFF: They recently sold -- sold that house three
10 years ago and made a considerable profit on it after several
11 remodelings or whatever, and bought property outside of Mullens
12 on the city limits and built a new home.

13 BARBARA: So they did stay in the same house, though,
14 for many years?

15 JEFF: Right, right, until all of us were grown and
16 out of college and had families, and they decided that they
17 wanted to do a little something different, which they are
18 entitled to. You know, they worked hard for what they got.

19 BARBARA: When you were -- and I want to talk about
20 when your dad formed his own company, too --

21 JEFF: Yeah.

22 BARBARA: -- because that I think is very interesting,
23 especially being nonunion.

24 JEFF: Right.

25 BARBARA: But when you were growing up, what did you

1 do for fun as a kid? What were some of the -- what was your
2 recreation like?

3 JEFF: Well, the original coal company, Amigo
4 Smokeless, used to have a recreation and playground area above
5 the community, but as the coal company was dying out, they let
6 the recreation area kind of run down, and several floods had
7 destroyed a swimming pond that they had made in the creek.
8 They had dammed it up with concrete walls and they had a diving
9 board and the kids could go up and swim, but it was actually in
10 a nice, cool, crystal clear creek which it's no longer like
11 that because of the mud and sludge runoff from strip mining.
12 Everything has turned it into mud water. I haven't been up
13 there for several years, but it was like that the last time I
14 was there.

15 We'd go swimming, skinny dipping was big, you know. And
16 when they eventually closed the Wyco Grade School, they had
17 torn the school down. So a bunch of friends and I that grew up
18 together, guys, we took all the lumber that was left over and
19 tied it on the back of our motor dirt bikes and drug it up the
20 holler, and we staked us out a piece of land and built us a
21 cabin or retirement community, we called it, our getaway up in
22 the woods. And it was, you know, about, I don't know, really
23 wasn't that far from the community but it was.

24 BARBARA: Right.

25 JEFF: We felt like it was out in the woods, and we

1 would go and our parents would allow us to go and spend the
2 weekends down there.

3 BARBARA: And how old were you back then?

4 JEFF: I don't know, fifteen, sixteen.

5 BARBARA: Uh-huh, high school.

6 JEFF: Yeah, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, something
7 like that. So that's when you really got to experiment, be out
8 on your own and, you know, just do whatever you wanted to. Of
9 course, there was drinking. Of course, there was smoking. You
10 always had somebody in the community that had a little
11 moonshine or something around if you wanted it or whatever, and
12 somebody would always go to the store and buy you a pack of
13 cigarettes because they knew you were going camping that
14 weekend or whatever.

15 BARBARA: Boys night -- boys weekend out?

16 JEFF: Boys weekend out. And it was usually about
17 every weekend and all the time when school was out, you know.
18 And we would go hunting or fishing.

19 BARBARA: I was wondering if you hunted.

20 JEFF: I really wasn't a big hunter, you know, because
21 I always liked animals and I really didn't like to kill
22 animals, but I enjoyed seeing them in the woods, but that was
23 one of the things that fathers did with their sons, and so
24 you'd get a rifle for Christmas and --

25 BARBARA: How old were you when you got your first

1 rifle?

2 JEFF: Twelve.

3 BARBARA: Twelve.

4 JEFF: Yeah, .22 gauge.

5 BARBARA: Now, what about your sister? Did she --

6 JEFF: My sister was the only girl and -- not in the
7 community --

8 BARBARA: Right.

9 JEFF: -- but the only girl in our family at that
10 time. And mom and her did things together and she taught her,
11 you know, the household stuff.

12 BARBARA: So the gender roles were pretty separate?

13 JEFF: I remember her playing a lot in the house with
14 dolls and clothing and drawing a lot.

15 BARBARA: Not being encouraged to hunt and --

16 JEFF: No, no.

17 BARBARA: So where did you go to high school? Was it
18 in --

19 JEFF: Mullens.

20 BARBARA: So you had to take a bus to Mullens?

21 JEFF: Right.

22 BARBARA: Uh-huh. And what was that like?

23 JEFF: Frightening at first.

24 BARBARA: Did it feel like you were going to a bigger
25 city? Is Mullens that much bigger than Wyco?

1 JEFF: Oh, yeah.

2 BARBARA: Okay.

3 JEFF: Yeah. Like Wyco is a community of like 300
4 people.

5 BARBARA: The coal --

6 JEFF: Yeah, the coal camp.

7 BARBARA: -- camp community. And Mullens was a city.

8 JEFF: And Mullens was like 4,000.

9 BARBARA: So that was like going to the big city.

10 JEFF: Yeah, yeah. And so we were bussed there. And
11 as you were going out of -- down the holler, you would have to
12 stop and pick up everybody as you went so you were really
13 loaded into a bus, you know.

14 BARBARA: How long did it take to get there, do you
15 remember?

16 JEFF: It's only a five-minute drive now by automobile
17 from one to the other, but it usually took about 35 or 40
18 minutes, you know, for that trip, morning and evening, but
19 that -- and, you know, that was good in a way. You got to meet
20 a lot of other people you never ever met and --

21 BARBARA: Did you like high school?

22 JEFF: I did like high school. I did.

23 BARBARA: Did your family used to -- did you used to
24 take trips to Mullens and go shopping?

25 JEFF: Oh, yeah, yeah.

1 BARBARA: Did you ever come to Charleston as you were
2 growing up?

3 JEFF: On occasion only when we would come to see my
4 mother's parents in Montgomery or Smithers and they would come
5 to Charleston for some reason. I don't ever remember like
6 coming for a movie or shopping or anything like that, just
7 maybe to visit relatives. We had some relatives that lived in
8 Sissonville and little places like that, or going through here
9 to visit relatives elsewhere, you know, we would always come
10 through Charleston. Traveled the old turnpike.

11 BARBARA: Was that an experience?

12 JEFF: The old two-lane turnpike. That was an
13 experience, yes, it was.

14 BARBARA: Is that when it went through the mountain,
15 the tunnel?

16 JEFF: Yeah, yeah.

17 BARBARA: Did you go on vacations out-of-state as you
18 were growing up?

19 JEFF: We did.

20 BARBARA: Where would you go?

21 JEFF: Had a favorite place my dad used to take us
22 down to Parisburg, Virginia, on the banks of the New River.

23 BARBARA: I'll bet that was pretty.

24 JEFF: Yeah. And we would tent camp, and he had the
25 whole setup and shebang and old green army tent that he had

1 gotten from someone. And I remember weeks before we went, we
2 would have to stretch it out in the yard at home and sweep it
3 off and set it up, and he would buy a big one gallon can of
4 linseed oil which really -- cottonseed or linseed oil which
5 really smelled terrible, and spray it with a garden sprayer.

6 BARBARA: Why?

7 JEFF: To keep it from leaking. That waterproofed it.

8 BARBARA: Oh, that was the waterproofing?

9 JEFF: Yeah, that was the waterproofing.

10 BARBARA: Okay. So then you would sleep inside of it
11 and smell the --

12 JEFF: Yeah, and smell like linseed or cottonseed oil
13 for weeks at a time, you know. But it was fun. It kept you
14 dry in the rainy downpours in the middle of the summer, you
15 know. And my mother would cook wonderful breakfasts on the
16 cookstove by the river. And I can remember the bacon and eggs
17 frying and the smell. I can still smell that. Make biscuits,
18 I never knew how she did that, make biscuits on a little stove
19 like that, but she always did.

20 BARBARA: That's great.

21 JEFF: I'm going to have to ask her about that.

22 BARBARA: How old were you when your dad formed his
23 own company?

24 JEFF: Sixteen.

25 BARBARA: Sixteen. So you did have an awareness of

1 what was going on --

2 JEFF: Yeah.

3 BARBARA: -- in terms of -- can you talk about that a
4 little bit. I mean, you said it was one of the first times
5 someone had formed a nonunion company --

6 JEFF: Right.

7 BARBARA: -- close by. And there were no -- were
8 there any problems or was it a source of discussion around the
9 family?

10 JEFF: Well, it was -- his major concern was was he
11 going to get anybody to come to work for him.

12 BARBARA: Were miners striking his company?

13 JEFF: Well, there were several strikes and some
14 disgruntled miners. And several of the people, of his
15 employees were family members that were out of work elsewhere
16 so they relocated. My mom's two brothers came from Fayette
17 County, and they had been out of work several months and needed
18 money. And my mom's sister's husband was a construction worker
19 and the housing industry was down and he couldn't build any
20 houses so he was looking for work, so he was the coal truck
21 driver. He bought him a coal truck and came to work for my dad
22 and hauled his coal for him. It was almost a family affair,
23 but he had several other -- two other men that were partners
24 with him who were also miners that were kind of disgruntled
25 with their work and looking to do a little something different

1 and better their families and make a little bit more money and
2 try to move themselves up.

3 BARBARA: Why did they decide to go nonunion?

4 JEFF: Because my dad was, first and foremost, I
5 think, concerned that if he worked very hard for his money, he
6 wasn't going to have someone else tell him how to spend it or
7 who to give it to and he wanted to be able to do that himself.
8 And that was his -- the basis I think of his mentality for
9 running his business was that it's our business, we make the
10 business decisions, and we treat our employees right. We give
11 them what they need. They give us an honest's day's work, and
12 that's how it should be.

13 BARBARA: So his loyalty wasn't to the UMW as --

14 JEFF: The only loyalty he had to the union at that
15 time was them keeping the tipple open for his coal trucks to
16 dump his coal and process it so he could ship it off to the
17 power companies to be sold and, therefore, make money.

18 BARBARA: Was he successful?

19 JEFF: They owned the mine for about five years, and
20 then one of his partners became ill and couldn't really help
21 them. And by that time I had graduated from high school, was
22 on my way to college. My sister was getting ready to graduate.
23 My brother was in high school. There were all three of us at
24 the same time, you know, within a year and a half apart that
25 were moving up. And so he went back to school, to mining

1 engineering school about the same time I did at West Virginia
2 Tech, and got a mining engineering and went to work for the
3 government as a federal mine inspector.

4 BARBARA: How old was he when he did that about?

5 JEFF: He was -- well, my dad is sixty now and I'm
6 forty.

7 BARBARA: Okay.

8 JEFF: So he was --

9 BARBARA: He must have been about forty then?

10 JEFF: Yeah, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty. And
11 all through that time, my mother, when we were growing up when
12 my sister was born and my sister turned -- my sister started
13 first grade -- now, remind you, we had no kindergarten back
14 then, no such thing as preschool or anything like that. We
15 went straight into first grade. My mother went back to school
16 and took night classes for her GED because she had never
17 finished high school. She completed her GED in about a year,
18 and she took the postal workers exam and got placed as a
19 postmistress, a temporary relief for the post office at Wyco,
20 so the original post office postmaster, Mrs. Bailey, could take
21 some time off. They had no one to replace her. So my mother
22 did a little part-time work in the post office back then and it
23 helped with income, too. So to make a long story short, she
24 eventually becomes postmaster at Wyco.

25 BARBARA: Full time.

1 JEFF: Full time, moves up. Mrs. Bailey retires to
2 Clearwater, Florida. She is still living down there. And my
3 mother moves up, and eventually five or six years ago gets her
4 own post office at Corinne, West Virginia, which is between
5 Wyco and Mullens, another little post office there. So she
6 ended up being a full time -- she is now retired from the post
7 office with disability because she had a stroke a couple of
8 years ago.

9 BARBARA: Did she then put your father through school?

10 JEFF: Well, apparently the mining business was pretty
11 good because they had some money saved somewhere.

12 BARBARA: And that helped.

13 JEFF: He did that at night and he would drive and
14 take classes.

15 BARBARA: Oh, okay, he did it at night. He didn't
16 close the business and go to school.

17 JEFF: No, no.

18 BARBARA: Where did you go to college?

19 JEFF: West Virginia Tech.

20 BARBARA: Okay. Did you go at the same time as your
21 dad?

22 JEFF: Yeah. One year there were some classes that we
23 were taking at the same time, yeah.

24 BARBARA: What was that like?

25 JEFF: Different classes. I never really --

1 BARBARA: Okay, you weren't in the same classes
2 together.

3 JEFF: We would meet at my grandmother's house in
4 Smithers and eat, but I lived on campus.

5 BARBARA: Oh, okay.

6 JEFF: I lived in the dorm.

7 BARBARA: So college was encouraged also, for you to
8 go to college?

9 JEFF: College was my getaway and my relief.

10 BARBARA: Okay. That is what you saw as your getaway
11 and relief?

12 JEFF: Yeah.

13 BARBARA: Did you not ever want to go in the mines?

14 JEFF: No.

15 BARBARA: Had you not thought about that?

16 JEFF: No, and my father never encouraged that.

17 BARBARA: Okay.

18 JEFF: You know, he always -- I think he realized a
19 long time when we were younger that we had other talents and he
20 said he would never force the issue and he would let us to
21 decide.

22 BARBARA: I'm going to turn this over.

23 This is tape one, side two, interview of Jeff Thomas.

24 Did your sister go to college?

25 JEFF: My sister did go to college, yes.

1 BARBARA: And your brother?

2 JEFF: And my brother, yes.

3 BARBARA: So all three of you went to college.

4 JEFF: Correct. My sister is a graduate from -- she
5 attended Marshall for two years and then went to Alderson
6 Broadbent, degree in microbiology and chemistry, and she is now
7 director of chemistry and laboratory services at Bluefield
8 Regional Medical Center at Bluefield.

9 And my brother graduated from Concord College, degree in
10 math, and he is a math professor in Mullens at the high school.

11 BARBARA: Did you finish West Virginia Tech?

12 JEFF: I did. I graduated from Tech in two years
13 instead of four because I had taken college courses in high
14 school.

15 BARBARA: Oh, you had?

16 JEFF: My precollege, I had taken English and math as
17 a night course.

18 BARBARA: Where at?

19 JEFF: At Southern West Virginia Community College.
20 That was a new college that just had opened up in the early
21 '70s as an outreach, you know, for Southern West Virginia in
22 that area, and they had branch campuses in Wyoming County and
23 Logan, Boone.

24 BARBARA: What county is Wyco in?

25 JEFF: Wyoming County.

1 BARBARA: Wyoming County. So how far did you have to
2 drive to go to your college classes?

3 JEFF: About thirty miles.

4 BARBARA: So you very early on in high school were
5 preparing yourself for college.

6 JEFF: Yeah, yeah.

7 BARBARA: What was your degree in?

8 JEFF: My degree from Tech is in business management.

9 BARBARA: Okay.

10 JEFF: At that time I had already had a plan as to
11 what I wanted to do career-wise and that was just as a
12 prerequisite for going on a little bit later.

13 BARBARA: What did you want to do at that time?

14 JEFF: I wanted to be a funeral director.

15 BARBARA: Why?

16 JEFF: Why? Well, I think the town funeral director
17 in Mullens was also my Little League baseball coach, and I did
18 play Little League baseball when I was growing up, that was one
19 of the activities we did. So he was my baseball coach, and he
20 made such an impression on me as an individual, and the
21 community looked up to him and admired what he did and always
22 respected him, and it was an outstanding profession, I found,
23 and he was compassionate and he helped people who were
24 hurting. And I felt like I always wanted to do something like
25 that, you know. Whether it be a physician, whether it be an

1 undertaker, a nurse, whatever, I just wanted to help people
2 that were hurting.

3 BARBARA: Did you think about becoming a funeral
4 director and moving back to Southern West Virginia or --

5 JEFF: I did.

6 BARBARA: Oh, you did do that, you went back?

7 JEFF: Right.

8 BARBARA: Okay. Tell me about that.

9 JEFF: But by that time it had changed after I had
10 gone to graduate school.

11 BARBARA: The graduate school was in the funeral --

12 JEFF: In funeral directing and embalming. That was
13 the University of Cincinnati.

14 BARBARA: Okay. So you moved --

15 JEFF: I moved from West Virginia Tech, I did -- moved
16 back home for a year internship under that funeral director
17 which was a requirement for entrance in the graduate school.

18 BARBARA: Okay.

19 JEFF: Then when I went to graduate school, then I got
20 my funeral directing degree, embalming degree, and went back to
21 Mullens. But at that time the funeral director had retired.
22 It had changed hands, a new owner, and my dream of coming back
23 to the hometown being the funeral director was not there
24 anymore.

25 BARBARA: Because the town had changed or just -- what

1 had changed about it? He had retired, but what had changed?

2 JEFF: Well, the promise wasn't there. He said,
3 "Well, if you do this and do that, you can come back and work
4 with me" and, you know, he was no longer there.

5 BARBARA: And you really wanted to work with him.

6 JEFF: I did.

7 BARBARA: That was really --

8 JEFF: I did. He taught me a lot in the years that I
9 did work with him, you know, not so much as book sense or book
10 learning, but he taught me how to deal with people.

11 BARBARA: So earlier when you said you wanted to get
12 away, it was just to get a better job within your community?

13 JEFF: Well, I knew I had to get away to learn
14 something new to bring back.

15 BARBARA: To bring back. So you wanted to bring
16 something back.

17 JEFF: Right. There were a whole different realm of
18 things that I felt I could help this community with, that I
19 wanted to do with this community, but, you know, things change
20 in life and you make those decisions and you move on.

21 BARBARA: Right.

22 JEFF: And we remained friends until he died up
23 several years ago or whatever. His daughter was an English
24 instructor for me in high school. That's how -- I actually had
25 to do a paper and an interview with him something similar to

1 this about his career and profession when I was a junior in
2 high school and that's how I became really interested in it.
3 And he picked up on that, he saw that, and he offered me a
4 summertime job that summer.

5 BARBARA: That's great. Role models are really
6 important.

7 JEFF: They are, they are, whether it be family,
8 friends, or your baseball coach. You know, they can make a
9 lasting impression on you and you carry that with you.

10 BARBARA: What do you think are the core values of
11 your family? What was emphasized growing up?

12 JEFF: Protect one another, you know, honesty, and do
13 a hard day's work, you know, do what you're supposed to do and
14 not really complain or, you know, do what is expected of you,
15 and even in the household. You know, we had chores and we had
16 to do what was expected of us. We never had a TV in our house
17 until I was like eight or nine years old. So we didn't have
18 that kind of entertainment. We did have a radio or something,
19 but we always found other things to occupy our time.

20 BARBARA: Right. Do you consider yourself
21 Appalachian?

22 JEFF: Yes.

23 BARBARA: As from being -- just from being from here
24 or is there something that you think of when you hear the term
25 "Appalachian" that comes to mind besides just being born in

1 West Virginia?

2 (Pause.)

3 BARBARA: That might be too broad of a question
4 actually.

5 JEFF: No, I can answer that probably two ways.
6 Appalachian at heart, yes, because I was born here, raised
7 here, and I can feel the people, you know, their needs and what
8 they -- what they express and I can understand them. But on
9 the broader scale, Appalachia also means a mixture, you know,
10 that mixture of people that came here years ago to help form
11 the Appalachia. You know, there were some people who have been
12 here for 200 years that were born and raised here, and those
13 are true Appalachian hillbillies, mountain people, whatever you
14 want to call them, good people, good earth -- down-to-earth
15 people, and a lot of them are very famous people.

16 But because of the way a lot of our families came to West
17 Virginia, we were searching for something better and we had
18 that longing for something better, and that is ingrained in us
19 and we always tried to do something better. We are always
20 doing something. You know, and my family members will say,
21 "Jeff, you never stop. You're always doing something, you're
22 always doing something." And my dad always told us, you know,
23 no matter what decision you make about your life, make the one
24 that is going to benefit you best, you know. Change is for the
25 better.

1 BARBARA: And you think that came from moving here
2 from your roots before or do you think --

3 JEFF: I think that is instilled in the process of us
4 getting here --

5 BARBARA: Okay.

6 JEFF: -- and it's passed down through generations.

7 BARBARA: Do you think it's different for the ones who
8 have been here longer --

9 JEFF: No.

10 BARBARA: -- in terms of --

11 JEFF: No, because they have their own -- because a
12 lot of the old -- the original settlers in Appalachia are very
13 famous, political, well-established names that have a root and
14 a foundation here, and they know the land, you know. They know
15 what it's about, but they welcomed us, too, to be a part of it.

16 BARBARA: Who is famous that you're thinking of when
17 you say that --

18 JEFF: Oh, the Hatfields and McCoys, you know, and the
19 senators, the old senators and the old governors --

20 BARBARA: Right.

21 JEFF: -- and MacCorkles, and people who founded the
22 cities and the towns, General Alfred Beckley, the military
23 people. And A.J. Mullens, he was a real estate tycoon and
24 railroader and everything, he founded Mullens. And Wyco was
25 named after Wyco Indians, you know, the Indian tribe. There

1 used to be Indian settlers down in the areas --

2 BARBARA: Sure.

3 JEFF: -- you know, down in there, Iroquois and
4 Stevenson, all of those are Indian names.

5 BARBARA: Uh-huh. Do you think that there are certain
6 values that you could ascribe as being Appalachian values?

7 JEFF: Yeah, just genuine trust --

8 BARBARA: Trust?

9 JEFF: -- of people. You know, everyone is not
10 trustworthy, but the benefit of the doubt is that you have to
11 give everybody a chance and see what they are about, you know.
12 It's not that they are out to get you or backstab you or do
13 something terrible to you. They have their own way of doing
14 things, and if you are not from here, sometimes you take that
15 wrong or, you know, you can't see the true meaning of it.

16 BARBARA: That they are not -- I guess I didn't quite
17 understand that. Are you saying that an Appalachian has a
18 trust of people and that outsiders may not interpret it that
19 way?

20 JEFF: Right, sometimes they become vulnerable from
21 outsiders. You know, Appalachian people are generally
22 trustworthy people.

23 BARBARA: Are they trustworthy --

24 JEFF: Of others, yes.

25 BARBARA: -- of other Appalachians or other people in

1 general?

2 JEFF: Oh, people in general. They can get very mean
3 and angry, too, when the trust is broken.

4 BARBARA: And this is a generalization.

5 JEFF: Right.

6 BARBARA: I mean, it's obviously not true of
7 everybody. One of the things that we have been talking about
8 is sort of a stereotypical image that some people have of
9 Appalachians.

10 JEFF: Uh-huh.

11 BARBARA: Would something come to mind if you were
12 outside of West Virginia -- or let me ask it this way. When
13 you went to Cincinnati and told people you were from West
14 Virginia --

15 JEFF: Right.

16 BARBARA: -- did you encounter any stereotypes or
17 questions about being from West Virginia that you thought fit a
18 stereotype? Do you know what --

19 JEFF: Yeah.

20 BARBARA: Do you understand what I'm saying?

21 JEFF: Or did I know the Hatfields and McCoys or stuff
22 like that.

23 BARBARA: I don't know, whatever. I mean, did you
24 ever have any encounters where -- or do you think there is a
25 stereotype of Appalachians?

1 JEFF: I think in the minds of a lot of outsiders,
2 there is still a stereotype of Appalachia.

3 BARBARA: What do you think that stereotype is from
4 people on the outside?

5 JEFF: Uneducated, family oriented, poverty stricken,
6 poor health care, no shoes, running around barefoot, playing in
7 a creek, sitting on the porch in the summertime listening to
8 the crickets.

9 BARBARA: Drinking moonshine?

10 JEFF: Drinking moonshine.

11 BARBARA: Do you think that that still exists, that
12 image of people from Appalachia now?

13 JEFF: Unfortunately it does.

14 BARBARA: Have you ever had any experience with being
15 treated that way?

16 JEFF: I have been asked did I ever do that, you know,
17 and I always tell them that yes, I've drank moonshine, and yes,
18 I've sat on the porch and listened to crickets, and yes, I've
19 run around barefoot and played in the creeks, you know, yes,
20 I've been uneducated before.

21 BARBARA: Before you went to elementary school.

22 JEFF: Before I went to elementary school, that's
23 correct. And I've been poor and some days I'm still poor. But
24 when you roll it all into one, you know, and you put it in that
25 perspective and they take time to think about their own life,

1 then they have been there, too, whether they are from
2 Appalachia or Cincinnati or St. Louis or L.A. There is a
3 little bit of Appalachia in America.

4 BARBARA: Everywhere.

5 JEFF: Everywhere in America.

6 BARBARA: Let's see. If you didn't have TV when you
7 were growing up for a while, what did you do in the evenings
8 together as a family? Was there anything -- did you stay
9 together as a family? It seems that nowadays people watch TV.

10 JEFF: Well, it was pretty tight quarters in a company
11 house with only four rooms and no indoor bathroom for several
12 years. It was an outdoor toilet. But parents, I remember them
13 playing cards a lot with neighbors.

14 BARBARA: Okay.

15 JEFF: And we would have our own card games with us
16 kids that would play, and we would go in the one room and sit
17 while the parents were in the other room.

18 BARBARA: Did all three of you share a room, a bedroom
19 together --

20 JEFF: We did.

21 BARBARA: -- in one room?

22 JEFF: We did. Until, you know, I was getting older
23 and my sister was getting a little bit older, that my parents
24 felt that wasn't appropriate. So my dad just cut a hole in the
25 ceiling and turned the attic of the house into one big long

1 bedroom and paneled it and put carpet down and had two windows
2 on each end and a fan because it was god awful hot.

3 BARBARA: I was going to say, it must have been awful
4 hot.

5 JEFF: It was so hot.

6 BARBARA: Did you get that room?

7 JEFF: I got that room and my brother got that room.

8 BARBARA: Okay.

9 JEFF: And I kept that room until I moved. You know,
10 I moved all of my stuff out of that room. But that was kind of
11 like a retreat for us, too. You know, that was someplace
12 private for me and my brother and our friends that we could go
13 to get away from my sister. She wasn't that bad. She was a
14 good friend, you know, and she played just as hard, you know,
15 with the rest of us.

16 BARBARA: Do you consider yourself as having a happy
17 childhood if that -- if it can be said that way?

18 JEFF: Stressful childhood sometimes.

19 BARBARA: Because?

20 JEFF: Well, I learned later in life through education
21 and psychology and stuff like that, that I probably was a fifth
22 wheel in my family, you know, the fifth wheel syndrome. And my
23 father had a younger son who was very active athletic, you
24 know, and my father was athletic. He played basketball a lot
25 and my younger brother played basketball a lot. So they kind

1 of paired up together, and my mother and my sister were paired
2 up together, and I was kind of the fifth wheel on that wagon.

3 And I was sort of left, since I was the oldest, I was sort
4 of left to experiment and fend for myself, you know, made my
5 own friends my own way. And my father was there, I asked a lot
6 of questions of him when I was growing up. I was a questioner,
7 why this and why that, why do you do this and why do you do
8 that, and curiosity, you know, and that gains knowledge. You
9 know, I wanted all the knowledge I could get.

10 BARBARA: Right.

11 JEFF: And I was hungry for that, and I would read a
12 lot, and I was very scientific oriented, science projects,
13 stuff like that.

14 BARBARA: Was there a library in Wyco --

15 JEFF: No. .

16 BARBARA: -- or Mullens? Was there a library in
17 Mullens? Where did you get your books?

18 JEFF: Only in the high school. I don't even think
19 there was a public library.

20 BARBARA: Where would you get your books to read?

21 JEFF: Only school books.

22 BARBARA: Oh, school books, so you would study a lot.

23 JEFF: Right. And the stressful part I think came
24 just as part of experimental, you know, growing up and teenage
25 and --

1 BARBARA: Sure.

2 JEFF: -- being pulled in different directions and
3 running around with friends and doing things. I always felt,
4 even though parents discouraged certain actions, you know, at
5 the time and I think their intentions were good, it just seemed
6 to cause a lot of problems later on in life, you know, and
7 those are the things that you learn to deal with as you grow
8 up --

9 BARBARA: Right.

10 JEFF: -- and start working them out yourself.

11 BARBARA: Right. Did you consider yourself poor when
12 you were growing up?

13 JEFF: I think in the community-wise, we were poor.

14 BARBARA: Did you think of yourself as being poor,
15 though?

16 JEFF: But not really. We always had food. We never
17 went hungry. We always had clothes. We always had an
18 automobile, you know. And we were always able to take a
19 vacation, you know.

20 BARBARA: And the standard of living was similar with
21 the people that you lived around?

22 JEFF: Most of them, yes. Now, there were some that
23 were really poor, you know, struggling to make ends meet. You
24 know, the father had left or divorce happened and the mother
25 was left there with the children, and you could see that. But

1 I know that my parents struggled. And that was a valuable
2 lesson to all of us, you know, us three children, too. Some of
3 them say they really don't see it now, you know, because we all
4 have good jobs and we make our own money and we spend it the
5 way we want to, but the value is still there that you have to
6 have something for a rainy day, you have to put something back
7 for the bad times.

8 BARBARA: Right. Right. It's a good lesson.

9 JEFF: And inevitably there are bad times, you know,
10 anywhere and any time in life.

11 BARBARA: So you went to the funeral -- you went back
12 to Mullens and decided you didn't really care for that.

13 JEFF: Oh, no. I was in the funeral business. I just
14 couldn't get a job there.

15 BARBARA: Oh, okay, I'm sorry, I misunderstood. I
16 thought when you went back, it wasn't what you thought it would
17 be and so you left.

18 JEFF: He had retired and the new owner didn't want to
19 hire me.

20 BARBARA: I see.

21 JEFF: So now I had to look for a job. So I moved
22 back to Montgomery where my mother's parents lived and I worked
23 for B.C. Hooper Funeral Home.

24 BARBARA: B.C. Hooper?

25 JEFF: H-o-o-p-e-r. It was an old established funeral

1 home, been there since 1860-some, even before West Virginia
2 became a state, I think. And the old last member of that
3 family owned that funeral home, and me and another funeral
4 director worked together for about a year and a half. Then I
5 got an offer to buy that funeral home in Mullens from the new
6 owner. He had run into some personal problems and had to leave
7 town, and so he offered it for sale. And I went back and tried
8 to raise the money, and my dad and I tried to raise the money,
9 and, you know, we didn't have, you know, a half a million
10 dollars back in 1980.

11 BARBARA: That's a lot of money.

12 JEFF: Yeah, to buy a funeral home.

13 BARBARA: That's a lot of money now.

14 JEFF: Although we could have made a lot of money.
15 You know, I could have made a lot of money in that business.
16 But in retrospect, it just probably was the best thing that
17 ever happened that it didn't happen.

18 BARBARA: That it didn't happen.

19 JEFF: Yeah, yeah, because I think I would have been
20 terribly unhappy, you know, because of changes in my life and
21 what was going on. I had met someone and gotten married and
22 that wasn't working out, and so I was just dealing with some
23 personal issues and I said, you know, I need to get this stuff
24 straightened out and then I can move on.

25 BARBARA: And did you stay in the funeral business for

1 a while?

2 JEFF: I stayed in the funeral business until 1994.

3 BARBARA: Did you come to Charleston?

4 JEFF: Came to Charleston to take a position for a
5 funeral home here and worked a year, year and a half, and left
6 that job, decided to change careers.

7 BARBARA: And what was your new career?

8 JEFF: New career is nursing.

9 BARBARA: Nursing.

10 JEFF: Yes.

11 BARBARA: And that's what you do now?

12 JEFF: That's what I do now. I'm a registered nurse.
13 I am working on my bachelor's degree in nursing.

14 BARBARA: Still caring for people.

15 JEFF: Still caring for people who are hurting,
16 whether they are dead or alive.

17 BARBARA: When you were in Montgomery, did you visit
18 your grandparents a lot?

19 JEFF: Oh, yeah. I lived with my grandparents for
20 about six months and then I got my own apartment.

21 BARBARA: When you lived -- now as you live in
22 Charleston or as you moved back here, do you visit your parents
23 regularly?

24 JEFF: I visit them when I can. You know, my mother
25 has been ill for the last couple of years and just went through

1 a major surgery. So I try to get back at least once a month or
2 once every other month, you know. My dad is on the verge -- he
3 is taking early retirement I think from the government this
4 year and my mom retired because of her illness so -- and they
5 still get out and travel. You know, my brother lives there in
6 town locally, kind of keeps an eye on them.

7 BARBARA: In Mullens?

8 JEFF: In Mullens. And I try to get back as much as I
9 can.

10 BARBARA: When your mother was postmistress in Wyco --

11 JEFF: Right.

12 BARBARA: -- was that a gathering place for the
13 community, the post office, or --

14 JEFF: Oh, that was. That was the main place.

15 BARBARA: So she could become a central conduit of
16 information, I guess --

17 JEFF: Yes.

18 BARBARA: -- or whatever?

19 JEFF: She knew everything that was going on.

20 BARBARA: Everything that was going on, right.

21 JEFF: Right.

22 BARBARA: Did she enjoy that?

23 JEFF: She did. She did. Not that she was a gossip
24 because I never really noticed my mom gossiping like people
25 would call it, but she would know what was happening that day

1 in the community or what happened the night before, you know,
2 by everybody coming in, you know.

3 BARBARA: Would they hang out there and just sort of
4 chitchat?

5 JEFF: No, they would hang out.

6 BARBARA: Hang out and talk.

7 JEFF: There were regulars that would come and talk.
8 I know my mom would kind of get a little upset because it would
9 keep her from putting the mail up, but how long does it take
10 you to put mail up for fifty families? You know, that's it.
11 Then your day is done and you have to sit there all day long,
12 you know. But it was an experience. I wish I had one of those
13 mailboxes that we had.

14 BARBARA: What did it look like?

15 JEFF: The little combination box in the walls.

16 BARBARA: No.

17 JEFF: They had a little combination.

18 BARBARA: Oh, really. So it wasn't a key. It was a
19 combination lock and it opened up.

20 JEFF: Right, number 17.

21 BARBARA: Did you have a party line, a telephone party
22 line?

23 JEFF: We did, for about six or eight years.

24 BARBARA: Uh-huh.

25 JEFF: And it would ring -- our ring was three rings,

1 three short rings, and then we had four other families in the
2 community that had different rings, one long and two shorts, or
3 two shorts and one long, or --

4 BARBARA: People listened in --

5 JEFF: Yes.

6 BARBARA: -- on different conversations?

7 JEFF: Yes.

8 BARBARA: Did you listen in on conversations?

9 JEFF: We did.

10 BARBARA: Yes, yes.

11 JEFF: We did.

12 BARBARA: What were some of the dinners that you
13 really liked? What kind of cooking does your mom do?

14 JEFF: Well, my mother was a good cook.

15 BARBARA: Was it Italian food?

16 JEFF: Sometimes, yeah. And she taught all of us how
17 to cook. You know, she felt that that was important. She
18 taught us how to do laundry. She taught us how to iron, keep a
19 house clean. You know, we had all those chores.

20 BARBARA: Right, and you had to do them as well as
21 your sister. I mean, that was not segregated just for your
22 sister to do?

23 JEFF: No, we washed dishes, yeah. Now, when we were
24 real young, my sister and I, we didn't have an indoor bathroom
25 so we took a bath in either the kitchen sink or a wash tub on

1 the kitchen floor, and my mother would heat water and
2 everything like that for us to bathe in every day.

3 BARBARA: Was there something that you could go to the
4 bathroom inside at night during the winter?

5 JEFF: No.

6 BARBARA: No, you would have to go outside.

7 JEFF: Well, I think my parents kept a --

8 BARBARA: Bucket or something.

9 JEFF: -- bucket or potty or something in the bedroom
10 and then we had one in the pantry, I think. And that was
11 always a chore and duty in the morning, to take that out and
12 empty it and clean it.

13 BARBARA: How old were you when you had the indoor --

14 JEFF: Bathroom put in?

15 BARBARA: -- bathroom?

16 JEFF: I think my dad did it when I was about nine or
17 ten.

18 BARBARA: Okay.

19 JEFF: Something like that.

20 BARBARA: You were older. Was it a big deal?

21 JEFF: Oh, yeah.

22 BARBARA: I'm sure.

23 JEFF: The big cast iron -- I remember six or eight
24 men carrying that bathtub in the house, and they had to carry
25 it up on the wooden porch on the front of the house and carry

1 it through, and they thought the floor was going to fall in in
2 the house, you know.

3 BARBARA: Did your dad add an extra room for a
4 bathroom?

5 JEFF: No, we had a side pantry --

6 BARBARA: That they converted.

7 JEFF: -- that they stored dry goods. In the old
8 company houses, they had what they called a dry room and they
9 stored bulk flour and lard and cooking stuff and dry goods in
10 there. So it was just like a five-foot-by-five-foot room
11 section. And then the other corner of that house was the back
12 porch, and that back porch later became a laundry room big
13 enough for a washer and dryer.

14 BARBARA: And the pantry just --

15 JEFF: The pantry was the bathroom.

16 BARBARA: So you didn't have a pantry anymore for your
17 dry goods.

18 JEFF: No, and my mother really didn't keep bulk dry
19 goods. She had that in the kitchen. The kitchen was big
20 enough, yeah. She had a ringer washing machine and she never
21 had a dryer, you know, until later on in life. She always hung
22 her clothes out to dry --

23 BARBARA: Uh-huh.

24 JEFF: -- on the clothesline. All the houses had
25 clotheslines.

1 BARBARA: And in the wintertime, do you hang them
2 inside?

3 JEFF: Sometimes she did.

4 BARBARA: I guess you could still hang them outside if
5 it was sunny.

6 JEFF: Right, she would. I remember they would be
7 frozen, you know, frozen sheets and frozen T-shirts. She would
8 bring them in and sometimes she would hang them over the top of
9 the warm morning stove in the living room. She had a line that
10 she could run across the living room and hang them up during
11 the day while no one was there. We were gone to school and dad
12 was at work.

13 BARBARA: Can you think of anything else that comes to
14 mind about growing up that I haven't touched on? Is there
15 anything that maybe would be different living in a coal camp
16 community than someplace else?

17 JEFF: Well, I think, you know, every place that you
18 live has its opportunities and its benefits --

19 BARBARA: Uh-huh.

20 JEFF: -- versus living in the city or a coal camp.
21 If you take the opportunity to get the most out of it, you
22 know, that experience will go with you.

23 BARBARA: Which was the attitude of your family --

24 JEFF: That's right.

25 BARBARA: -- was very optimistic.

1 JEFF: Right. We are very pro, you know, we like --
2 we look forward to change and we recognize that a lot of that
3 change is -- the foundation for it is what we went through and
4 the experiences that we went through, but it's for the better.
5 You know, do something for the better as my dad would say, you
6 know.

7 BARBARA: Did the other kids that you ran around with,
8 did they have the same feeling, too?

9 JEFF: Yeah. Oddly enough I grew up with four really
10 close boys and myself and two girls. There were seven of us in
11 that community that graduated in high school and all seven of
12 us --

13 BARBARA: Felt the same way?

14 JEFF: -- had the same, you know, drive and optimism.
15 And all of us were in the top ten of our class, seven out of
16 ten, and all of us have college educations now and families and
17 doing different careers. So that's a pretty good ratio --

18 BARBARA: Yeah.

19 JEFF: -- for a high school of only a hundred
20 students, we were in the top seven. So we were pretty tight
21 knit. We knew when we had to study and we knew when we could
22 play.

23 BARBARA: And that runs contrary to a stereotype that
24 people in Southern West Virginia or in hollows are afraid of
25 change or don't want change or --

1 JEFF: Right, and I think that comes a lot from that
2 immigrant status. You know, everybody was brought in there for
3 something better. They were looking for something better for
4 their families. Even though the father may not be able to do
5 it or the mother had to keep the house, but they were looking
6 for something better for their children and they instilled
7 that.

8 BARBARA: Okay. Well, thank you very much. I can't
9 think of anything right now, but I really appreciate your --

10 JEFF: You've got me on a roll now. It's memory time.

11 BARBARA: It's memory time. If you can think of some
12 memories you want to share or anything, you're more than
13 welcome to --

14 JEFF: I wouldn't change it for anything.

15 BARBARA: That's good.

16 JEFF: You know, even the good and the bad.

17 BARBARA: Right.

18 JEFF: You know, there were bad experiences and bad
19 times and bad feelings, but that helps also to unlock --

20 BARBARA: Uh-huh.

21 JEFF: -- the ability to understand and to search out
22 and just learn to be yourself --

23 BARBARA: Right.

24 JEFF: -- grow up and be happy. I mean that's --

25 BARBARA: That's great.

1 JEFF: -- that's important.

2 BARBARA: Okay. Thank you.

3 JEFF: All right. Thank you.

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25